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Doug Ford's War on the Universities

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If you look at the Ford Government's policies towards Ontario universities and connect the dots, the inescapable conclusion is that it has declared war. It wants to reshape the universities to conform to a radical vision, and it is trying to use funding cuts, incentives, and regulations to achieve it. That vision is a university system that focuses on training workers, does it cheaply, and is politically quiescent. The vision gives short shrift to the quality of education and to research.

Consider how recent initiatives contribute to the vision. A 10 percent tuition cut and 1 percent annual base budget cuts for the next four years are intended to reduce revenue and force down costs, but they will also impair quality. The attack on so-called "double-dipping" by faculty receiving both pensions and salaries, in addition to being an exercise in scapegoating, ignores the fact that The federal Income Tax Act requires workers to start collecting their pension at age 71 whether or not they are still employed. The government is trying to force older faculty members to retire, but any savings will likely be used to meet budget cuts, rather than the ostensible goal of hiring younger faculty. Finally, making ancillary fees optional for students is intended to cripple student organizations critical of the government such as student government and newspapers.

The key reform is the transformational initiative to increase the proportion of outcome-based funding for universities from the current level of just over 1 percent to 60 percent by 2024-25. The funding is to depend on 10 not-yet-finalized metrics, though the budget says they will reflect the "government's priorities in skills and job outcomes, and economic and community impact" and that, as a result, "university programming will be better aligned with labour market demands." Universities will have some flexibility to weight the metrics based on their own goals but, given the government's focus on the labour market, it is unclear to what extent universities will be able to make research a priority.

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